

Union: Departing chief has been an asset

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Erickson says new substation needed

Duxbury

DUXBURY — Although Kenneth Erickson has been Duxbury's fire chief for less than three years, local firefighters think he has strengthened the department's ability to respond to fires and medical emergencies. Erickson, who will leave at the end of the month to become fire chief in Walpole, thinks Duxbury needs a new fire substation and additional public safety dispatchers. In a rare tribute to a departing supervisor, James Page, president of the 17-member local firefighters union, said Erickson has been a "valuable asset" to the department. In an open letter to residents and taxpayers, Page said Erickson "has been the proactive professional leader that the people of Duxbury have wanted."

Because of Erickson's efforts, "we're a stronger and better department today," Page said in an interview.

Page, who has been a firefighter for 21 years, said Erickson "brought a new perspective from outside the department and kind of shook things up a little."

Erickson, then the assistant fire chief in his native North Attleboro, was hired 2½ years ago

by then Town Manager Thomas Groux. Page said his letter was written at the request of the union membership as a response to charges circulating around town that Erickson had only used Duxbury as a stepping stone to a bigger job.

"That impression could undermine the advances he brought in here," Page said.

Page said Erickson-prompted improvements ranged from training to "the nuts and bolts of daily operations."

Erickson said yesterday that as Duxbury's fire chief he "worked very hard to improve public safety in all its aspects."

Although he said he had not seen the recent report of an ad hoc public safety committee that calls for opening a fire substation somewhere in West Duxbury, he agreed that there is a need for improved service west of Route 3.

"We get 30 to 40 percent of our calls from that part of town," Erickson said.

The public safety committee reported that a fire truck from the town's central fire station can get to only 36 percent of Duxbury residents within four minutes and that only 57 percent of Duxbury residents can expect an ambulance to arrive within four minutes.

"If money was no object, I'd put it on Route 53," Erickson said of a West Duxbury substation.

Otherwise, he said, he favors renovating and reopening the Ashdod station on Route 14, which was closed five years ago in an economy move.

If the fire department had a West Duxbury substation, it would be able to respond to fires or medical emergencies within four minutes in 90 percent of the town, Erickson said.

He estimated that renovating the Ashdod station would cost \$250,000 and that hiring six firefighter/EMTs to staff it would cost about \$300,000 annually.

Erickson also said that the town's new centralized public safety dispatch service needs help.

Fire department dispatchers were moved to

the police station earlier this year in conjunction with the start of E-911 emergency telephone service.

The system "works until there's an emergency, then it tends to get overloaded," the chief said.

He advocated adding part-time dispatchers during peak daytime hours at an estimated annual cost of \$30,000.

"Downsizing is not always the best way to go when public safety is at stake," Erickson said.

He said Duxbury firefighters are better trained and more involved in day-to-day operations than they were when he took over as chief.

"The better trained a fire department is, the better service it can deliver to residents and taxpayers," Erickson said.

Page said Duxbury firefighters "have developed a very strong attachment to the chief" and were concerned enough about Erickson's reputation to prompt the letter of support.

"He's a good man," Page said.

Erickson, 36, will take over as fire chief in Walpole on Monday.

Until a new chief is selected by Town Manager Rocco Longo, Deputy Chief Harri-man will be in charge of the fire department.